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HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL  
DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGICAL CHEMISTRY  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02115

June 23, 1969

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Dear Josh,

Thank you for your very kind and welcome letter. I was somewhat embarrassed to have received it before getting around to writing a long-intended one of my own to you, and now that embarrassment is magnified by the delay in my response. I hope you will forgive both sins of procrastination.

My tendency to put off writing has been fed by the hope that my thoughts about the future would crystallize sufficiently for me to include in a letter at least a tentative outline of plans. Sadly, no such crystallization has occurred, but rather than prolong the lapse in our communication, I'll set down some of the components of my confusion in place of the nonexistent prospectus.

First, my commitment to neurobiology remains only tentative, and the most profitable way of extending it even over a short time (say two years) is unclear to me. The project initiated by Charles Thomas still seems to me well conceived and promising, but with the facilities available and essentially only myself working on it, a year or so more of effort will probably only bring it to the threshold of really interesting developments. During that period, the time available for me to teach myself some basic neurobiology would have to be traded off against time devoted to often tedious technical implementation. And at the end of the period, the project might not have reached a point where it would be suitable for me to take some of it with me to another laboratory. (In this context, there is some irony in the fact that the Stanford Genetics Department, with its instrumentation shop and computer facilities, seems far better equipped than this department at Harvard to exploit the project's potential.) As an alternative to staying here beyond December, when my present fellowship expires, I have therefore considered (inconclusively) either seeking a more "classical" neurobiology training in a lab such as Kennedy's at Stanford or Kuffler's here or in the program reportedly being set up at the Salk Institute expressly to train newcomers like me, or getting a year's exposure to some other "non-classical" approach such as Brenner's. Meanwhile, though, I have yet to obtain any really deep intellectual satisfactions from my work in science, I am growing impatient and older, the prospect of more "training" is not attractive, and I still find

entertainment in thinking about small puzzles in molecular biology; so I have also considered going back to genetics in the hope of deriving some short-range pleasures at least. (I should confess that I have felt up to now a perhaps excusable reluctance to think specifically about transformation and have overcome that reluctance only sufficiently to review a few papers and to help teach a genetic mechanisms course but not sufficiently to write my own papers.) In brief, I have not yet found "my thing" in science and am beginning to despair of finding it.

Second, I am still depressed by what I regard as a darkening political scene and wonder whether a point of intolerability will be reached where scientific research on however "important" a problem will no longer represent a moral or even effective primary activity for me. I am also concerned that preoccupation of this sort might itself, if unacted upon, dilute my enjoyment and competence in the pursuit of research.

Last, I seem to be beset rather self-consciously by a delayed and apparently common adolescent doubt about the sort of life and life-style that I would find "fulfilling" and "meaningful". This doubt may be no more than the sum of my other uncertainties, but it feels like something more without being well defined beyond that.

In spite of this confusion, the time is approaching (a month or so at best) when practical considerations will compel some decision on my part - whether to search out support for another year here, to look for a post-doctoral position in another lab doing neurobiology, classical or not, or to begin the search for a first job and a laboratory of my own (though I have some hesitations about taking on the responsibilities of teaching until I have established at least one sound area of research for myself). Needless to say, your comments would be welcome. Also, I'm sure you realize that because of my strong positive feelings for Stanford, the possibility of an appointment there would receive very serious consideration and would weigh heavily in my attempts to formulate plans for the near future.

Along a line rather oblique to my own problems, your description of the changes imminent at the Medical School moves me to make one comment that I hope will not be out of place; namely that I believe it would be tragic for the Genetics Department to lose Gan through the inadvertence of poor communication. An endorsement of Gan's scientific abilities on my part would seem gratuitous, but I would like to emphasize the value of the easy-going rapport he establishes with graduate students and the light,

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straightforward, common sense approach he takes to their problems. (You must have noticed some of his almost daily goads while I was writing the thesis last year.) At any rate, the point I want to make is that, although I am unfamiliar with the details of academic progression at Stanford, it seems to me Gan should be qualified for tenure soon (if he has not been for some time), and I know very definitely that his self-confidence and strong attachment to the department would benefit from the assurance that tenure would imply and correspondingly must suffer from unusual delays in a tenure appointment. I am keenly aware that I write in the absence of a full appreciation of the situation, but my sense of the point's importance to the department's future and to Gan personally precludes silence. I hope very much that he plans to stay on at Stanford and will be encouraged to do so.

Lastly, Josh, I want to include a personal note of thanks, more direct and less formal than the one in the thesis acknowledgments and long overdue, for the support provided by your frequent expressions of confidence in me. Without awkwardly belaboring the point, I just want it known that your confidence was not and is not now taken lightly in my thoughts.

Best regards to all my friends at Stanford.

Sincerely yours,



Lawrence Okun

P. S. Tell Edna I appreciate the batches of Post columns and to keep them coming; I'm not always able to get the weekend Post here. How are the chlorine experiments turning out?

If you are still reading Reston's columns and not Wicker's, I advise that you reverse that policy completely.